

A Quick Guide to NSF GRFP Reference Letters

Whom should you ask to write letters for you?

People who **know** you! And can address your intellectual merit, broader impacts, or both!
You want letter writers who know more about you than your grade in his/her course.

“You are better off with a good letter from an unknown professor who knows you well than a mediocre letter from a Nobel Prize winner who met you once at a seminar”

(DJ Strouse - <http://djstrouse.com/guide-to-applying-to-us-science-phd-programs-and-fellowships>)

Two reference letters are required, but application reviewers will read up to three letters.
The submission system allows up to five reference letters, and you assign a priority ranking to each reference. If more than three letters are submitted, the three with highest rankings will be reviewed.

Good idea to ask at least four people to be references in case someone does not submit on time
(Your references will not know the priority ranking you assign them nor if his/her letter is not reviewed.)

Try to gather a diverse set of letter writers, so each can address a different positive aspect of you
For example, Current research advisor

Someone else familiar with how you perform research (e.g. previous research advisor)

Someone who can address your broader impacts (e.g. volunteering supervisor, mentor)

(Frequently done: Two letters focused on intellectual merit and one focused on broader impacts)

What should you provide to your letter writers?

Both personal statement and research statement

You'll likely be asking your letter writers long before your statements are submission ready. That's okay!
Send a draft to start, so they will know what you're writing, and then send your final version later on.

CV/Résumé

Your goals/plans/aspirations for the future

NSF definitions of intellectual merit and broader impacts

Application reviewers evaluate your application based on these two criteria

Your letter writers should specifically address your **intellectual merit** and **broader impacts**.

Guidance about what to write – What should they focus on? (More on this below)

Most letter writers will be very busy, so this helps them write a better letter for you.

With your guidance, each of your letter writers can discuss different strengths of yours, so each letter offers new information to application reviewers.

Link to letter submission (<https://www.fastlane.nsf.gov/grfp/ReferenceLetter.do?method=letter>)

Offer to meet in person! (Many will not take you up on this, but you should ask and let him/her decide.)

When should you ask your letter writers?

Ask **at least 1-2 months** before the deadline (preferably 2-2½ months)

Reference letter deadline for 2018 is Friday, November 2 at 5pm (Eastern Time)

General timeline for email reminders:

1-2 weeks before the deadline

5 days, 3 days, and then the day before the deadline

(Ask each letter writer about his/her preferences on reminders. They can vary substantially!)

Before sending reminders, check to see if letters have been submitted

(on [Fastlane](#) under “Check Application Package Status”)

What should your letter writers focus on?

All writers should address your **intellectual merit** and **broader impacts** and provide answers to these types of questions:

- What makes you stand out from other great graduate students?
- What have you accomplished as a researcher?
- Why are you interested in graduate studies and how are you prepared to excel in graduate work?
- What unique (future) contributions can you make to your field and to society in general?
- How effectively do you communicate (e.g. written, oral or poster presentations)?
- How well do you work with peers and supervisors?
- Do you have the potential to become a leader in your field or as a member of the scientific community?

Current or former research advisors should write specifically about your research-related strengths, e.g. scientific potential, independence, creativity, perseverance, thoroughness, experimental skills

Your current advisor should also discuss the originality of your research proposal

Typically, applicants demonstrate **intellectual merit** but lack **broader impacts**

Notes from previous reviewers—

Strong letters address:

- the applicant's intellect; work ethic; creativity; self-motivation; transferable skills; potential as a future researcher; and commitment to successful, impactful research
- specific achievements or contributions that demonstrate the applicant's **intellectual merit** and **broader impacts** significance of the proposed research
- how the applicant's background or research brings diverse perspectives to STEM

Weak letters tend to:

- be short, vague, and not give enough specific detail about the applicant
- lack excitement and duplicate information found on transcript
- address grades only and give no indication of knowing the student beyond coursework

Remember to thank your letter writers and let them know the outcome of your application!

Additional Resources—

[UVA Engineering Graduate Writing Lab Events](#) and [Online Resources](#)

A wealth of information and resources about NSF GRFP, other fellowships, and improving your writing skills

<http://www.malloryladd.com/nsf-grfp-advice.html>

Up-to-date, helpful advice about all aspects of NSF GRFP from a successful applicant (2013)

Reference Letter advice in two places: $\frac{1}{3}$ & $\frac{2}{3}$ way down page

<http://www.clairemckaybowen.com/fellowships.html>

Good advice covering all parts of NSF GRFP from a successful applicant (2015)

Reference Letter advice $\frac{2}{3}$ way down the page

<https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2017/nsf17123/nsf17123.pdf>

FAQs for GRFP Applicants (from National Science Foundation)

Reference letter FAQs start on page 15 (Question 56)

http://www.phy.davidson.edu/NSF_GRF/NSFGRFfinal.html

Written by previous NSF GRFP reviewers

Hasn't been updated since 2002 and targeted to physics applicants, but the reference report advice (near bottom of the page) still holds true!

Special Thanks to –

Archie Holmes, Pam Norris, Haibo Dong, all previous reviewers who responded to survey and provided helpful GRFP advice

If you have questions, comments, updates, or additions –

Please let us know!

(This was compiled originally in September 2018 by Katie Pelland (cmp5cg@virginia.edu), who is always happy to hear suggestions for improvement and expansion of this resource, for the UVA Engineering Graduate Writing Lab)